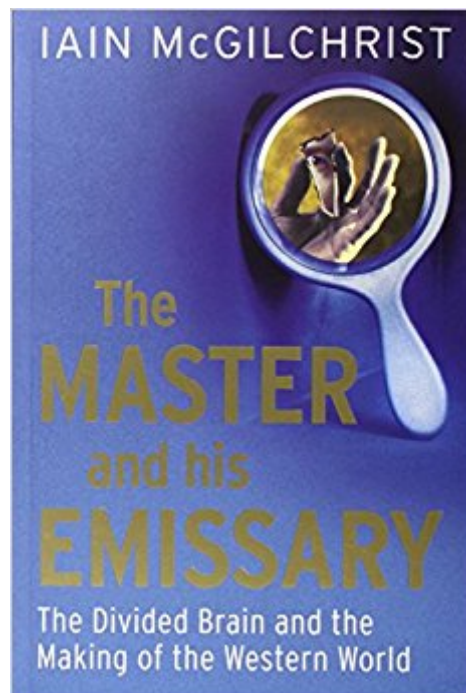




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The Master And His Emissary: The Divided Brain And The Making Of The Western World



Synopsis

In a book of unprecedented scope--now available in a larger format—•Iain McGilchrist presents a fascinating exploration of the differences between the brain's left and right hemispheres, and how those differences have affected society, history, and culture. McGilchrist draws on a vast body of recent research in neuroscience and psychology — to reveal that the difference is profound: the left hemisphere is detail oriented, while the right has greater breadth, flexibility, and generosity. McGilchrist then takes the reader on a journey through the history of Western culture, illustrating the tension between these two worlds as revealed in the thought and belief of thinkers and artists from Aeschylus to Magritte. "A landmark new book. . . . It tells a story you need to hear, of where we live now."—•Bryan Appleyard, Sunday Times "A very remarkable book. . . . McGilchrist, who is both an experienced psychiatrist and a shrewd philosopher, looks at the relation between our two brain-hemispheres in a new light, not just as an interesting neurological problem but as a crucial shaping factor in our culture . . . splendidly thought-provoking. . . . I couldn't put it down."—•Mary Midgley, The Guardian Named one of the best books of 2010 by The Guardian

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Customer Reviews

A U.K. mental health consultant and clinical director with a background in literature, McGilchrist attempts to synthesize his two areas of expertise, arguing that the "divided and asymmetrical nature" of the human brain is reflected in the history of Western culture. Part I, The Divided Brain, lays the groundwork for his thesis, examining two lobes' significantly different features (structure,

sensitivity to hormones, etc.) and separate functions (the left hemisphere is concerned with "what," the right with "how"). He suggests that music, "ultimately... the communication of emotion," is the "ancestor of language," arising largely in the right hemisphere while "the culture of the written word tends inevitably toward the predominantly left hemisphere." More controversially, McGilchrist argues that "there is no such thing as the brain" as such, only the brain as we perceive it; this leads him to conclude that different periods of Western civilization (from the Homeric epoch to the present), one or the other hemisphere has predominated, defining "consistent ways of being that persist" through time. This densely argued book is aimed at an academic crowd, is notable for its sweep but a stretch in terms of a uniting thesis. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"McGilchrist describes broad [intellectual] movements and famous figures as if they were battles and soldiers in a 2,500-year war between the brain's hemispheres. . . . A scintillating intelligence is at work." •Economist

I give this book 5 stars because it is utterly engrossing, well argued, expansively researched and I could not put it down. There is cutting edge neuroscience, vast historical, artistic, philosophical and literary discussions. An enormous argument based on the neuroscience of the right and left brain hemispheres and their effects on Western history and its development. There are ideas and concepts I learned which I most likely never would have been exposed to. I will conclude this part of my review with a hearty recommendation for reading this book and I say that you open your mind and go on the journey. There is time for thinking about it afterwards. Though I give this book 5 stars, it does not mean I have no reactions. McGilchrist is tireless with his argument of the left hemisphere dominating the right to such an extent that you feel exhausted by the end of the book. He makes it clear that he desires a balance of the two hemispheres, yet you can lose that point during his arguments. I do wish he had discussed more the dangers of right hemisphere dominance. Indeed, The Renaissance's open minded worldliness led down some murderous pathways. Nietzsche is quoted many times to support his arguments of Western Civilization's dominance by left hemisphere rationality and abstract thinking and indeed the critique is very much in line with Nietzsche's views. McGilchrist and Nietzsche both see Western civilization going off the rails because of Plato and only going back on the rails with the Renaissance and then going back off with the Reformation and Enlightenment. Nietzsche's condemnation of other-worldly rationality is given a specific place in the brain-the left hemisphere. Those Platonic Forms and the argument that truth is only found through

rationality, McGilchrist says is the left hemisphere's poison which rolls through Western history. A stunning neuroscientific backing of Nietzsche. Yet, Nietzsche's philosophical overview can break down in the cold objective view of hemispheric brain science and actual history. McGilchrist's hammering of the nasty left hemisphere's dominance of history, sounds like McGilchrist's own left hemisphere going off the rails. I think Nietzsche would have told him to calm down a bit, and that is saying a lot, indeed. McGilchrist's view on religion is fascinating. He understandably leaves out Nietzsche's complete condemnation of all things Christian and wades in. The Protestants are condemned as destroying the Renaissance, (Nietzsche agrees) by bringing back a rational word based left hemisphere religion which assaults the intuitive and metaphorical Catholics. The Catholic church can be comforted that McGilchrist says they are more right hemisphere based than the fundamentalist Protestants who are left hemisphere based, yet will priests find comfort looking out at a flock who are there to buff up their right hemispheres'? The idea that Catholicism is good for brain hemisphere balance is interesting but may not be taken up by the Vatican just yet. There are more things to say, but as Nietzsche wrote: "Follow you, not me". Read this amazing book and think your own thoughts.

AMAZING BOOK!!! Helps explain why this world is skewed toward "profit at all costs" mentality. Should be required reading for every thinking adult. Note that it is a well researched book, and therefore is not a light read - but well worth the effort to do so.

McGilchrist is quite readable and the topics covered in this book are complex. Clearly, his original background in literature makes this possible. He has, I would say, an expansive style, close to conversational at times. This makes him far more accessible than others on the same topics. I do not have the background to offer a detailed critique on his assembly of research, though his conclusions fit my own take on some of the core issues. It is exceedingly clear that our culture (western European and North American in particular) has a tremendous bias for the piecemeal, analytical approach vs. the large picture meaning of things. For example, science remains largely hobbled by the insistence that purpose plays no role, even though no scientist would ascribe to that belief for his or her life; and likewise, the insistence that all that happens can be fully explained by knowing all the antecedents. The denial of novelty leaves only causality as the shaper of the future and therefore eliminates any possibility of deciding to make a unique decision. This voids everything we do to change, whether education or psychotherapy or anything else. It also makes the legal system a pointless exercise. If we welcome the perspectives offered by how the right hemisphere organizes

experience, then there is the return of mystery and awe and wonder. Clearly the skills and abilities supported by the left hemisphere have gotten us quite far, but now we are in serious danger of destroying everything because we collectively continue to dismiss or minimize the truth that is presented to us by how the right hemisphere shapes our experience. If there is a fault in this book, it may be his tendency toward entification, that is, making a full-fledged entity out of each of the hemispheres when they are richly organic systems in the overall brain. Entification makes for fun reading but we are responsible for our actions. Our brain's hemispheres ultimately belong to us and if we recognize and act on that, then we will have a chance to change our ways.

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